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CONCERNING FATHERS

BY EDITH RONALD MIRRIELEES

WHEN Valdez, the Spanish critic, named Samuel Richardson "the father of the modern novel," his purpose was a compliment, but his performance may well have sent a shudder through Richardson's shade, loitering in the aisles of some celestial bookstore, while from a warmer corner Fielding, at the words, cocked up an appreciative eye.

A rich minute that for Fielding and all the satirists! It was as though some applauding foreigner, memorializing George the Third, had named him in good faith the mother-in-law of his country. A rich minute and one from which the flavor has not yet departed. Instead, from Richardson down even to Wells, its pungency increases with the passing of the years, until now, as we turn the pages of our "best English novels," it is over-pungent, acrid upon the tongue.

Every English author has had a father; nearly every one has been a father in his turn. In the light of these two facts, where do they come from—this brood of blackguards, this monstrous regiment of fictional fathers that whines and blusters and sneaks and bullies down through the pages of two centuries?

Richardson himself, though his case is bad enough, is by no means the chief offender. The notable Mr. Harlowe is a bully indeed, but he is a straightforward bully, whose children know the worst at the first clap.

"No words! I will not be prated to! I will be obeyed! I have no child, I will have no child but an obedient one!"

A thought arbitrary, but at least the tearful Clarissa creeps away with eyes unblackened and mind unpolluted. Of another mould is Richardson's other creation, Goodman Andrews, model parent of the still more model Pamela.

"I hope the good squire has no design." So he adjures the fifteen year old on hearing of the gift of a gown from her dead

mistress' wardrobe. "We fear—yes, my dear child, we fear—you should be too grateful and reward him with that jewel, your virtue."

Fear it? Yes, and expect it too. Not a letter but does its best to accustom her to the idea. The money she sends him he does not return—oh no!—but tucks it away, wrapped in a rag, among the thatch, "lest we should partake of the price of our daughter's shame." A case for the psycho-analysts here! It is not until *after* Pamela, pelted by paternal warnings, has become "suspicious and fearful" that any indignity is put upon her.

An eye for the main chance too has the good Gaffer Andrews, along with his other charming qualities. Let Pamela be tormented, abducted, and still escape the worst, and he will acknowledge her, even summon up courage to rebuke her oppressors—in a gentle, slightly squeaky tone, not unworthy of Pamela herself. "'Great as you are, Sir, I must ask for my child,' and burst into tears." But let the worst come upon her, through however little fault of hers—No, no! No neighborhood opprobrium for the family of Andrews! Honesty is more than their jewel in that household; it is their first-rate life insurance.

And yet with Gaffer as with Mr. Harlowe, some virtue must be allowed him. He poisons his daughter's mind, but he refrains from battering her body. It remained for Fielding, the chuckler, to experiment in combinations and introduce into *Tom Jones*, in the person of Squire Weston, an archetype, a model, for the fictitious fathers of a whole century. There is no quoting from the conversation of this gentle parent with his young daughter; it will not bear quoting. And as for missiles heavier than those of conversation—"Sophia, just risen from the ground, with the tears running from her eyes and the blood trickling from her lips." Has the charming Sophia been thrown from a coach? Has she been set upon by robbers? Not so! She has merely been questioning, in language of the mildest, her father's decision that she marry the neighborhood nincompoop. "Father of the modern novel" indeed! No wonder there was hilarity among the angels!

And Fielding knew paternal goodness too when he met it. That he shows us in another character in this same book. While

Sophia abides, locked in, in her bedroom, feeding upon forebodings and bread and water, or goes out, if she go at all, in fear of her life of her father, Tom Jones, the rascal, finds his, till treachery alienates him, useful for the paying of bills, for bed and board and friendly counsel. An ideal father, this Squire Allworthy, as good as his symbolic name, an all but perfect father—only, unfortunately, as the plot betrays to us, a foster father, not a real one at all. It is always the foster father who scores in these annals. Only when you have begotten a child, have you a patent for hating it.

The elder Random enlarges his patent a little and hates his grandson as much as his son and throws in his daughter-in-law for good measure, but, on the whole, it is Squire Weston who creates the father tradition for his generation. Some obscure fathers there are, to be sure, both in this generation and in the next one, who are good enough—Mr. Moreland, for example, in *Northanger Abbey*—but they are merely neglectedly good, as though the author had not taken the trouble to make them otherwise. It is always the full-size tyrant, never his halfway well-meaning brother, who gets the spotlight and the centre of the stage—except, of course, in the case of those fathers who are slightly touched in the head. A fool is almost invariably kind to his children, the more fool the kinder.

But it was an unlovely age at best, that flat, miasmic, middle eighteenth century. I turn from its output to novels later written though earlier read. Dickens, champion of all the maligned, must have fathers enough in his pages. . . . And yet, to speak truth, it is Mr. Pecksniff who comes first to mind, with Mr. Turveydrop to follow. Mr. Bray I remember too, whining tyrant of Madeline, beloved of Nicholas (Curious, how seldom the curse of heredity operates inside the pages of a novel!); and Mr. Podsnap; and Rogue Riderhood, with his rooted objection to poll-parritin'; and Gaffer Hexam, with an aversion as deep to the lower education of women; and Mr. Cruncher, his rust-reddened fingers forever in contact with the ears of his son; and Mr. Skimpole; and the elder Harmon, true descendent of eighteenth century forebears. Mr. Wilfer, father of Bella, goes back to the simpleton type, for the rule established by his predeces-

sors holds good with Dickens still—more fool, less tyrant. Mr. Crummles is a gentle father to the insufferable Phenomenon. Mr. Jelleby is as mild as silly. Not once do we find Wilkins Micawber laying the heavy hand of correction on one of his offspring.

No, in spite of the foolish fathers who are tolerably affectionate, Dickens does nothing to lift the curse of an earlier century. The Jew comes into his own in his pages, the mendicant finds his apologist, and the failure, and even the sneak thief, but the father wanders outcast still. *David Copperfield*, indeed, best loved of books, escapes from the domination of the unhappy race, but its escape is accomplished only by strong measures. David, Em'ly, Steerforth, Uriah—every important character but one is orphaned before the story opens. And while the one remaining does his best—falls to drink and to forgery, to daughter-auctioning and other pécadillos—he cannot, unsupported, cast a gloom over all of the pages.

It is no wonder that other enterprising novelists read the secret of Dickens' formula for winning affection and took advantage of it. The amputation of a father or two from its pages would have turned almost any tragedy of the time into an applicant for a place among the "glad" books. *Hard Cash* for instance! Richard Hardie begins with the familiar eighteenth century gesture of forbidding his son's marriage—a mere tyro at the beginning, but he improves fast, takes to rages, to embezzlement, to shutting his son up in madhouses, so that in four hundred pages the unhappy lad is scarce rid of him. A grand old parent that, of the noble antique mould.

Mr. Osborne in *Vanity Fair* is another antiquity. No whining about him; rages and caning and disinheritance are his weapons, and Sir Pitt on the one hand and Lord Steyne on the other bear him worthy company.

And yet, in spite of the trio, Thackeray alone among his fellows has, underneath his conformity, a kind of a sneaking tenderness for fathers. He takes the Dickensonian path of escape more often than Dickens himself, kills them early and often in his stories and presents us with fatherless heroes and heroines galore. And once, even, he permits one to live and in Colonel Newcome—

but it should be remembered in extenuation that Thackeray, left orphan at five, lacks the fillip of personal experience in his writing.

George Eliot is another who believes in the death sentence. The Misses Brooke are bereft in their early 'teens when their dispositions may well be supposed to be not yet entirely soured. Eppie, though she has a father, escapes the discomfort of knowing him. Adam Bede is almost as unparented as David itself; Hetty, Dinah, Arthur, Adam, Seth—not a father amongst them except one who is drowned (and good riddance to him!) by falling, drunk, into a stream in the first chapter. By the time the Grand Triumvirate had finished its work, the father bade fair to vanish from fiction altogether or to survive, along with fairies and ghosts and the devil, as a form of modified myth.

But though the middle nineteenth century might shield itself behind the grave, its emancipated later years could do with no such subterfuge. By the 'eighties, shields were out of fashion. Off came drapes and pantalettes from a host of subjects, and out popped the father again none the worse—which in his case means none the better—for his bout with mortality. The costume, to be sure, was altered a little. The heavy-handed parent had shifted his residence from Picadilly to Seven Dials. Vituperation was out of date along with bodily violence, but oppression held its own, and the essential element of the father by which he may be known under all disguises—his disregard for his offspring, his willingness to profit by its misfortunes—remained unaltered. That "sire of Richard Feverel" shows black against a midnight of bad fathers. And Dr. Middleton in *The Egoist*, how did he ever produce an uncontaminated Clara?—who, by the way, with the twentieth century in full sight, pays him mediaeval reverence still.

The twentieth century was, indeed, actually on the threshold before a break appeared in the league against fatherhood. Then Kipling, who had already rescued a continent from obscurity, made a try at father-rescue too—an ill-fated try, its outcome not the father aided but the child destroyed. What he produced was less a new race of parents than a shuddering newness in children—monstrous children, pigmy men-about-town, living

according to a code mature and cynical. Witness Wee Willie Winkie, for example, with his carefully considered chivalry, rooted beyond the reach of panic, and his fellow, the young gentleman who purloined the “’parkle crown,” whose tongue, to be sure, has a childish affliction, but whose spirit was thirty on the day he was born. I say nothing of *The Drums of the Fore and Aft* nor of the inimitable *Kim*. Nobody has ever supposed that immaturity of years in those cases gave pretensions to childishness.

And the new race, alas, was not for Kipling alone. Through the early years of the twentieth century, it has grown and flourished in the pages of many books. In *The Tree of Heaven*, May Sinclair has lately created a typical member of the clan. Listen to him in the schoolroom with his father, debating the grazing of the pony’s knees on an extra dangerous hill:

‘That,’ said Anthony [the father], ‘is why you’re forbidden to ride down it. You’ve got to be spanked for this, Nicky.’

‘Have I? All right. Don’t look so unhappy, Daddy.’

Anthony did it (the spanking) much better this time. Nicky, though he shook with laughter, owned it very handsomely.

Later he confides to his dupe that he really had not ridden the pony at all; he had only thought it a “jolly sell” (oh, very friendly and condescending he is!) to get himself spanked for a deed he had not done.

And Nicky is representative of all the race. Some are a little better than he, some a little worse, but not one of the horrors can actually be said to have a father at all—not if fatherhood depend on the presence of a child.

And yet, in spite of the Kipling fumble and its disastrous aftermath, it is with the twentieth century that hope does dawn for male parents. It dawns not in Kipling’s well-meaning pages nor in those of his followers, but with a group whose intentions are of the worst. Wells, Bennett, Galsworthy—one and all, they fall upon the father with a kind of gleeful ferocity. They make him a fool and a boor; they make him a bore insufferable; they make him a tyrant and blandly contented with tyranny, but they begin his rescue for all that, for his children have found him out.

“‘I wish to please you, papa. . . . I will obey you, papa. . . . I am anxious to perform my duty.’” So, in *The Egoist*, with paragraphs of parental diatribe between, speaks Clara Middleton of the year 1880.

The tune is different with the heroines of Wells. Watch Anne Veronica in her struggles! “Duty” has gone into the discard at last. At last, after generations of weeping and fainting and heartbreak, the victim has taken to other weapons; the Englishman’s house is invaded, no longer his castle, though the ogre is still inside.

A flouted tyrant is scarcely a tyrant at all, and, his children now flouting him, we watch hopefully to see, little by little, the father of the English novel draw in his horns, shear off his expletives, rein in his temper, till, in a decade or two, he sidles through the pages as meek as his American contemporary.

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